

NOTES FROM THE BANDSTAND

American Patrol: *Glenn Miller and WW II*

BY KARL PEARSON

On July 29, 1944, Captain Glenn Miller and the American Band of the Supreme Allied Command were playing an open air concert to an enthusiastic audience of over 4000 servicemen at General Jimmy Doolittle's Headquarters at Wycombe Abbey, High Wycombe, England. At the end of the concert Doolittle stepped up in front of the band and complimented Miller and the orchestra on their efforts. Doolittle concluded his remarks by saying that "Next to a letter from home, your music is the greatest morale booster in the ETO (European Theater Of Operations)."

Two and a half years earlier, in December 1941, Glenn Miller and his Orchestra was at the height of its popularity. Miller's recordings were selling well and one particular number, "Chattanooga Choo Choo," was ready to break the one million mark in sales. Miller had just signed a contract for a third season of radio programs for Chesterfield Cigarettes; the band had recently appeared in the 20th-Century Fox film "Sun Valley Serenade" with Sonja Henie, and the orchestra had returned to the Cafe Rouge of the Hotel Pennsylvania in New York City for a third successful visit. The attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, would change Glenn Miller's career and direction in a few short months.

In December 1940, a whole year prior to American entry into World War II, Glenn Miller began saluting the men in the service on his three-times-a-week program for Chesterfield Cigarettes. In August 1941 Miller initiated a series of one-hour

Saturday afternoon broadcasts saluting the men and women in the service. "Glenn Miller's Sunset Serenade" saluted various military installations every week. Five camps were randomly selected for each Saturday afternoon broadcast. Each camp, asked to select their favorite tune, was sent a group of fifty popular recordings, and civilian listeners were asked to select their favorite tune from one the five camps had chosen. The camp (or camps) with the greatest number of votes was awarded a brand new radio-phonograph combination. In the Fall of 1941 the broadcasts were opened to the public; a Miller fan would be admitted upon purchase of a twenty-five cent defense stamp, with all proceeds donated to the USO. Glenn paid for all program expenses, including the musician's salaries, network time, room rental, and purchase of the records and radio-phonographs.

The "Sunset Serenade" broadcasts continued after Pearl Harbor, and Glenn and the Orchestra contributed even more towards the war effort. The band broadcast its Chesterfield Shows from several service camps and military installations, participated in several events for the Treasury Department and even appeared on a shortwave broadcast of the "Command Performance" series, which was beamed to servicemen around the world. Glenn even moved his salute to the services to his Chesterfield program when network time was no longer available for the "Sunset Serenade" series.



GLENN MILLER'S BAND OF THE AEF IN THORPE ABBOTTS ENGLAND ON SEPTEMBER 1, 1944.

These additional wartime activities were not enough for Glenn Miller. Like many Americans, he was a deeply patriotic man who felt that he should do as much as possible to support the war effort. In June of 1942 Miller applied for a commission in the Naval Reserve, feeling strongly that his musical abilities could be put to good use by Uncle Sam. A few weeks later the Navy rejected his application. After the Navy rejection he applied for and received (in September 1942) a commission in the Army Specialist Corps. Glenn's enlistment in the Army became front-page news: here was a famous entertainer with a million-dollar business, walking away from it all to serve his country. On September 27, 1942, Glenn Miller and his Orchestra played their farewell performance at the Center Theater in Passaic, New Jersey. It was an emotional scene for all present. Vocalist Marion Hutton, overcome with emotion, left the stage during the middle of "(I've Got A Gal In) Kalamazoo." Most of the band wasn't doing very well either, and

Miller, famed for his cool, calm exterior, was also affected. The curtain came in the middle of the band's closing theme.

On October 7, 1942, Captain Glenn Miller reported for duty in Omaha, Nebraska, and his initial duties included supervision of Army musical activities in nine states. After a series of transfers Captain Miller was reassigned to The Army Air Forces Technical Training Command at Knollwood Field, North Carolina on January 1, 1943. His initial plan was to create a series of AAF Orchestras that would play for servicemen and help improve morale. Unfortunately Glenn ran into stiff resistance with many old-line AAF officers who felt that the traditional military band sounds were more inspiring than popular music. Glenn scaled back his initial plans and instead concentrated his efforts in building one large AAF band.

Miller began to gather as many top-flight musicians as possible to build his super-AAF orchestra. Over the next few months he was able to get several men from his civilian

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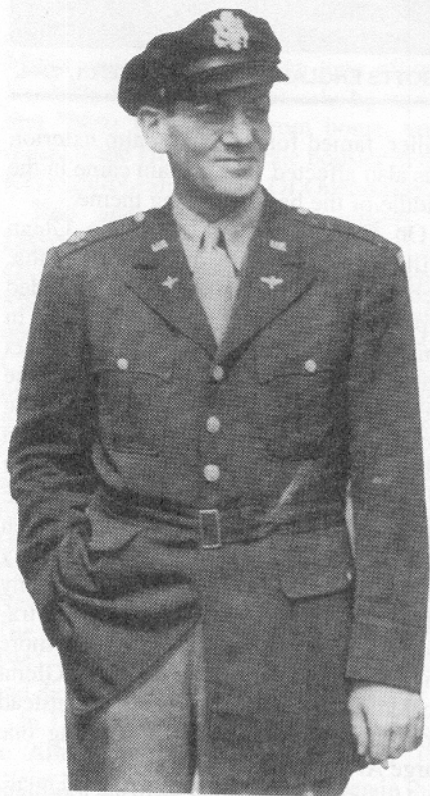
orchestra, including trombonist Jimmy Priddy, Bassist Trigger Alpert, trumpeter Rubin "Zeke" Zarchy, arranger Jerry Gray and Don Haynes, Glenn's peacetime business manager. In addition to these men Miller was also able to secure a number of musicians from other well-known dance orchestras, including pianist-arranger Mel Powell, guitarist Carmen Mastren, reedman Peanuts Hucko, and trumpeter Bernie Privin. Glenn was fortunate enough to secure the services of drummer-singer-bandleader Ray McKinley, whom he had known for many years. Miller's plans also called for a large string section as a part of the full orchestra,

and he began to gather men from a number of symphony and radio orchestras.

By the spring of 1943 Glenn's super-AAF band began to take shape. Within a few months the organization would number close to sixty men; this number would, in addition to the orchestra, included several vocalists, an arranging team, an instrument repairman, and a radio production unit that included script writer, actors and announcers! Several members the group could also substitute for others as the need arose. Vocalist Lynn Allison, for example, sang regularly as a part of the Crew Chiefs vocal group, and could also fill in for one of the tenor saxists in the event of illness.

In May of 1943 The Band of the Training Command of the Army Air Forces began a new series of radio programs titled "I Sustain The Wings." The series extolled the virtues of the Army Air Forces in a series of short dramatic skits and also featured the band playing old standards, current popular numbers and old favorites from the Miller civilian band book. The first six programs were broadcast on a "test basis" over WEEI Boston, the local CBS affiliate. On Saturday, July 17, 1943 "I Sustain The Wings" made its nationwide debut over the CBS network at 2:00 p.m. Eastern War Time (EWT) the fall of that year the program was moved to NBC where it was heard in prime time at 6:00 p.m. EWT. Vocals were initially handled by Tony Martin, and later by Johnny Desmond and the Crew Chiefs. These Saturday afternoon broadcasts pleased both civilian listeners and AAF brass alike.

Another of Glenn's great plans also came to life during the summer of 1943. On July 28 his 418th AAF Marching Band made its debut at a bond rally at the Yale Bowl in New Haven. The marching band made its entry into the bowl with its two drummers and two string bassists mounted atop platforms attached to two jeeps. The band played march versions of pop numbers such as "Jersey Bounce," "Blues In The Night," and "The Saint



MAJOR GLENN MILLER in Wendling, England, August 25, 1944



MAJOR GLENN MILLER'S AMERICAN BAND OF THE AEF in Bedford, England, July, 1944.

Louis Blues.” The marching band, although very popular with the New Haven cadets, was a short lived venture for Captain Miller, as many of the old-line officers detested any deviation from military tradition.

The band increased its radio activity in the fall of 1943, by appearing on a weekly series known as “Uncle Sam Presents,” which was shortwaved to servicemen overseas. Two sub-units within the band also began their own series of radio programs. “Strings With Wings,” led by Sgt. George Ockner, featured the band’s string section playing a mixture of popular and light classical pieces, and the dance band, led by Sgt. Ray McKinley, was heard on “Wings For Tomorrow,” playing items from the McKinley and Miller libraries. Both programs were heard only in the New England area. The full band made a series of “V-Disc” recordings for American troops stationed around the world and also appeared at several bond rallies. Other radio appearances and transcriptions followed.

Even with the increase in broadcasting and public appearances Glenn felt a need to do more. He began to search for a way to get the band overseas so it could play for troops closer to the fighting front. In early May of 1944 Glenn and Don Haynes had a chance meeting with Colonel Ed Kirby, part of General Eisenhower’s SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces) Staff in England. A new radio service known as the Allied Expeditionary Forces Program was being created, to be run by the BBC in London. The service was to be beamed to invading Allied forces and would feature British, Canadian and American talent. Kirby’s chief mission was to obtain an American orchestra for the AEF, and when Miller offered the services of his band, Kirby began to make arrangements to get the band shipped overseas. Within a matter of a few weeks the news arrived: General Eisenhower had personally requested the services of Captain Glenn Miller and his Orchestra for participation in the AEF.

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project. The band immediately cut short a cross-country war bond tour and broadcast its last "I Sustain The Wings" program from Chicago on June 10, 1944.

Captain Miller flew ahead to make all the necessary arrangements for the band. The orchestra arrived by ship in Glasgow, Scotland and was then transported to London where they were to set up headquarters. Upon his arrival Captain Miller had discovered that one of Hitler's new weapons, the unmanned V-1 rocket bomb, was causing great death and destruction in London. Miller feared that one of the "Buzz bombs" could wipe out his entire orchestra, and, concerned for the safety of the men, began to search for location out of buzz bomb range. Glenn discovered comparative safety in Bedford, a small village north of London, and radio studios were set up in a converted social hall owned by the local gas company. Miller's intuition proved to be right on target this time, for the day after the move to Bedford a buzz bomb landed directly behind the band's former London billet, killing dozens of people.

Upon arrival in London the band was renamed "The American Band of the Supreme Allied Command;" within a few weeks the title changed to "The American Band of the AEF;" the name that it remained under for the remainder of its stay in the ETO. Work proceeded on setting up the band's broadcasting schedule. The dance band, led by Sgt. Ray McKinley, was heard on the "Swing Shift" program, while Sgt. George Ockner and the string section revived their "Strings With Wings" series. Sgt. Johnny Desmond, backed by the full band, appeared on "Sgt. Johnny Desmond Sings," while Sgt. Mel Powell led a swing sextet from within the band on the "Uptown Hall" program. Pfc. Jack Rusin, the band's second pianist, had a solo program, titled "Piano Parade," and the full orchestra was featured weekly on its own

program, under the direction of Captain Miller. All the programs were recorded and rebroadcast at various times, which meant that listeners to the Allied Expeditionary Forces Program could hear contingents of the AEF Band on virtually every day of the week!

The first broadcast by the full band was on July 9; a few days later, on July 14, the band visited Thurleigh Airfield, initiating a series of visits to various bases and camps that would last for several months. The servicemen's reaction to the music was nothing less than incredible, as many of the troops were long-starved for entertainment from home. Sgt. Jerry Gray called these servicemen "the best audience in the world." After the Thurleigh concert Captain Miller told Colonel Kirby that "making all the money in the band business couldn't make me this rich." During the month of August alone the band travelled to 35 different military installations, and the various units made 44 different broadcasts. Some of these broadcasts were prerecorded, as bad weather occasionally grounded the band at a remote location and prevented their return to Bedford.

Over the next few months various Allied artists appeared in person or on the air with *Major* Glenn Miller and his American Band of the AEF (Miller had received word of his promotion in mid-August). During the overseas troop visits Dinah Shore, Bing Crosby, Fred Astaire and Morton Downey appeared with the band or its various sub-units. British bandleaders Jack Hylton, Regimental Sgt. Major George Melachrino and RAF Sgt. Jimmy Miller appeared with the band as did British vocalists Beryl Davis, Vera Lynn, and Ann Shelton. On October 30th the band began a series of prerecorded propaganda broadcasts beamed directly to German troops. On these programs Major Miller exchanged dialogue in German with a woman announced as "Ilse," and Sgt. Johnny Desmond sang several American songs in German.



MAJOR GLENN MILLER AND SINGER DINAH SHORE

Major Miller was not satisfied, and in the Fall of 1944, with Paris in the hands of Allied troops, began to make plans to take the band over to France to entertain Allied troops. By mid-November he had received permission to take the band over to Paris for a six-week period, but before the band could leave it had to pre-record six weeks' worth of programming for AEF. This feat was accomplished during a three week period while the orchestra maintained its regular broadcasting schedule and made several personal appearances!

Major Miller decided that he would leave for France a few days early to take care of business, including arrangements for a special Christmas Day broadcast which would be the first direct broadcast from Paris since the fall of France in June 1940. On December 15, 1944, Major Glenn Miller, along with Colonel Norman Baesell and the pilot of the plane, left the Twinwood Farm airstrip near Bedford and headed for Paris.

When the band arrived in Paris, Major

Miller was not there to greet them. Miller, always a stickler for details, had not made transportation arrangements for the band from the Paris airfield. This was the first sign that something was wrong; Don Haynes began to check around for word about Miller. No records of the arrival of the plane could be located at any airfield. On December 24 the United States Army announced that Major Glenn Miller and the other passengers of the plane were officially declared missing in flight. In Major Miller's absence it was decided that Sgt. Jerry Gray would lead the band on broadcasts and that Sgt. Ray McKinley would conduct during personal appearances. The band carried out its Christmas Eve broadcast from Paris, which was shortwaved to the USA.

But what happened to Glenn Miller? A military board of inquiry was held in January 1945. The board concluded that the airplane carrying Major Miller and the other passengers had developed icing problems while over the English Channel,

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and that ice on the wings or a frozen carburetor had caused the plane to go into the channel, sending the plane's passengers to a certain death. The United States Army officially declared Major Glenn Miller dead on December 18, 1945. Since then a number of bizarre theories regarding Miller's disappearance developed. In the 1980's one of the more credible (and frightening) stories appeared: an English navigator, returning to England from an aborted bombing mission, recalls the squadron jettisoning its bombs while over the English Channel. He also recalled seeing bombs hitting a small Norseman plane similar to the kind that Miller was flying in that day. Miller and the other plane's passengers may have been killed by "friendly fire."

The band continued entertaining troops after Major Miller's disappearance, although rumors began to circulate that the band would be broken up. These rumors proved to be false and over the next few weeks the orchestra played a number of concerts in Paris, most of them in freezing temperatures. Many of the musicians played with their gloves on, and Sgt. George Ockner even performed his special solo version of "The Flight Of The Bumble Bee" while wearing gloves! By January of 1945 network lines from Paris to the BBC in London had been reestablished and the band was able to remain in France while maintaining its broadcasting schedule.

Over the next few months the band gave hundreds of concerts to Allied troops and even gave a special concert for top Soviet brass. After the German surrender the orchestra traveled to Germany and gave a concert to Allied troops in the Nuremberg Stadium. There was no longer a need for the AEFB after the war ended, and with its chief reason for being in the ETO gone, Major Glenn Miller's American Band of the AEF was shipped back to the States for

refurbishment and eventual transfer to the Pacific Theater of Operations.

On the band's return trip to America it was announced that Japan had surrendered, thus ending World War II. Plans to ship the band to the Pacific were cancelled. The entire band was granted a thirty-day furlough, although a few men were discharged upon arrival. The remaining members of the band reassembled in New York to resume the "I Sustain The Wings" broadcasts for a few weeks, but by the end of November the orchestra was disbanded and the remaining musicians received their discharges.

One of the last appearances of Major Glenn Miller's AAF Overseas Orchestra was at a National Press Club Dinner held in Washington, D.C., with President Harry S. Truman and General Eisenhower both in attendance. Comedian Eddie Cantor gave a moving tribute to Glenn Miller as he introduced the band:

"As a civilian he led an orchestra that for three years was the number one band in America. Now Glenn Miller could have stayed here. He could have made himself a lot of money. But he chose not to. He was an extremely patriotic man, and he felt an intense obligation to serve his country. So he disbanded his orchestra and formed an even greater one. He took himself and his orchestra overseas where he felt he could do the most good for our fighting men.

"And now this great band is back here this evening without its most important man, Miller himself. For, as we know, he made the supreme sacrifice for his country. But he will never be forgotten, for always we will have the sound of the great music he created." ■

(ED. NOTE — "Glenn Miller and World War II" will be the subject on *Those Were The Days* November 12. **Karl Pearson** will co-host this special presentation and listeners will hear a generous sample of Miller broadcasts and recordings from the WW II years.)